Becoming-Witch: Narrating Witchcraft in Early Modern English News Pamphlets

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1. THE SOURCES IN CONTEXT

The texts that are the focus of this article were published in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period in London, specifically in 1582 and 1612. They come from a tradition of publishing in print and for sale court documents from selected English witch trials. This use of word-for-word court evidence in printed pamphlets is quite rare: for example, it does not happen often in other felony cases (murder, incest, or theft cases). It did not happen in neighboring nations in quite the same way either, even those like Scotland, which shared a number of assumptions about witchcraft, a language and, particularly after 1603, converging legal and political structures. In these English cases, it seems to be thought that witchcraft is a special crime (what, in other contexts, was referred to as *crimen exceptum*). In this context, witchcraft is special in that it seems to have been thought particularly appropriate to provide *verbatim* evidence of this crime to a wider audience and readership outside the courtroom. In this construction of the crime, the words of the accusers and accused matter in a particular, exciting way that is emphasized as a marketing strategy in the titles and subheadings of news pamphlets.

But this paper will argue that this claim to *verbatim* status and documentary reliability is in essence illusory, and can be unhelpful if taken literally. It creates an impression of an overly neat and definitive version of witchcraft events, one that can be an impediment to understanding their complexity, then or now. In my first book, *Reading Witchcraft* (1999), I suggested that we cannot be sure how far the words of the accused and accusers are, in fact, their own, or of how they were prompted and mediated. Having become suspicious of my chosen primary sources in this way many years ago, I also now suggest that this notion of illusory closure ought to be extended to other texts dealing with magic across histories and cultures, and that it ought to be deepened by the Deleuzian notion of becoming. Instead of accepting the

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idea of a finished, closed, univocal text, we may find it helpful to ask more questions, or at least to frame them in a different way, with reference to current anthropological and analytical thinking.

To begin with, we should ask the questions that I posed back in the late 1990s: exactly whose voice are we reading or hearing in each case, why are they speaking as they do, and how has the result been recorded and mediated? How are the words of the accuser or accused shaped and reshaped by circumstance or pressure at the time of their utterance and reproduction? What are they trying to achieve in telling us a story—either one that is volunteered, or one that is extracted from them? Does the story have one or more versions, and did these leave any trace that might point to its origin or help us further understand its contexts? These are questions relating to a narrator, and to the authorship and co-authorship of accounts. Further, who else might be present, bodily as a listener or in the mind of the speaker, and how might they be influential? Who is the implied reader or listener? These are questions about audience and reader response. Finally, what genre might the story belong to? Does a sense of telling a story belonging to a particular genre pattern exert its own pressures? The tools of close reading and literary taxonomy can thus, I argue, help us to understand witchcraft and magic more precisely, whatever the context or language. But in addition to these, I would now want to ask how far the story is part of an attempt to imagine a possibility beyond the present, a becoming something or someone else, the performative trying on of an identity as "witch" or "victim of witchcraft."

Some aspects of my discussion will be specific to my chosen primary texts, the witchcraft pamphlets, so some further detail about these will be helpful. In the pamphlets, the court documents were usually grouped loosely to tell the story of the trial, and they were introduced by a specially written preface offering general moralizing statements. They do not appear to have been heavily edited internally, although occasionally a brief comment would be appended after the document had been reproduced (e.g. telling us that the accused was convicted, or describing their appearance or demeanor). Most of the authors are anonymous, although the two that I have selected to discuss are not. There are nineteen (surviving) published accounts of this kind of detailed evidence given at trials during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James VI and I (1558–1625), with further examples of this kind of detailed evidence in four other works. There are thus around forty published works in total that form a corpus for contemporary understandings of early modern English witches, most of them demonologies or trial accounts. So that is the context for my discussion of these works: a small but significant body of texts that draw attention to their own literary status.

2. 1612: ALIZON DEVICE, JOHN LAW, AND ROGER NOWELL

I will start where I started my first book, *Reading Witchcraft*, almost twenty years ago. I might as well quote it *verbatim*, given my concern for verbal exactness:

Which of the elements in the following story are true? On 18 March 1612 a young woman called Alizon Device went out from her home in the Forest of Pendle in Lancashire to beg, and walked along the road at Colne Field towards the neighbouring village of Colne. On the way there she met a pedlar and asked him to sell her some pins. But the pedlar refused to open his pack for her, and would not sell her any. Almost immediately a black dog appeared to Alizon Device and said to her, "What wouldst thou have me to do unto yonder man?" Alizon asked, "What canst thou do at him?" The dog replied that he could lame the pedlar and Alizon responded with ferocious brevity: "Lame him." The pedlar fell down lame and Alizon was later arrested and tried for her attack on him by witchcraft.

Readers of such a story will divide into two main groups: those who accept that the magical details in the story are probable, and those who do not believe in magic. There will be further divisions within the second group: for example, those who suggest that the talking dog was an hallucination of Alizon's, those who believe that she was pressed by the prosecuting authorities into creating a folktale-like story, those who read her story as a voluntary adoption of the powerful mythic status of a witch. Some will see the whole story as fiction, while others will contend that the pedlar really did fall ill, or that Alizon really saw a (mute) black dog. But what about the naturalistic details of the story? Was Alizon really a beggar? Did the pedlar refuse to trade with her?

[. . .] The account of Alizon's trial, Thomas Potts' printed pamphlet *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster* (1612) doesn't give us a single truth about Alizon Device—he gives us three versions of her story. The version given above is from Alizon Device's own confession. In his pamphlet Potts presents this as being a transcript of what she said in court, but in fact it is clearly a copy of the statement which she made to the magistrate (a document known as an "examination") on her arrest several months before. Potts admits as much in saying that her confession "agreeth verbatim with her owne Examination . . . when she was apprehended and taken." Potts, therefore, is not always completely trustworthy in his reporting. The second version of her story comes from the pedlar himself. Also presented as courtroom testimony, again possibly erroneously, or deceitfully, it records that the pedlar, John Law,

> went with his Packe of wares at his backe thorow Colne-field: where unluckily he met with Alizon Device, now Prisoner at the Barre, who was very earnest

> with him for pinnes, but he would give her none: whereupon she seemed to be very angry; and when he was past her, hee fell downe lame in great extremitie.

The pedlar does not say that Alizon asked to buy pins, but that she begged them from him. [. . .] Since Alizon also said that she was going out to beg in Trawden Forest that day, it may seem likely that she would beg pins from John Law rather than ask to buy them. But John Law's son, Abraham, gives yet another version of events in Potts' account, which begins to make the reader question the stability and truthfulness of any of the stories about the case. Abraham Law, whose statement is also presented by Potts as a transcript of what was said in court, said that he had been sent for by letter on 21 March 1612, and had found his father "speechlesse, and had the left-side lamed all save his eye." The modern reader hastily redefines the word "lamed" and may conclude that John Law had had a stroke. But Abraham then describes his conversation with his father, who

> had something recovered his speech, and did complaine that hee was pricked with Knives, Elsons, and Sickles, and that the same hurt was done to him at Colne-field, presently after that Alizon Device had offered to buy some pinnes of him, and she had no money to pay for them withall; but as this Examinates father told this Examinate, he gave her some pinnes.

He says that Alizon begged pins from his father, but that John Law gave her pins rather than refusing them. This leaves Alizon no valid reason to attack him.[1]

All this seems relatively inconsequential, perhaps, in the grand scheme of things. Alizon was hanged for her witchcraft, and perhaps we should focus on that, or on her gender, or her youth (she was the grandchild of one of the other accused women, and the daughter of another), or Lancashire's reputation as a hotbed of Catholicism, or another factor within the story. Emma Wilby pointed out in 2005 that I omitted from my list of possible reader responses another possible scholarly approach: the idea that some readers, like herself, might see a shamanic experience lying behind Alizon's encounter

1. Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 1–2; Thomas Potts, *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster* (London, 1612) R3v-Sv. There is also an edition of Potts in Gibson, *Early Modern Witches: Witchcraft Cases in Contemporary Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

with the black dog.[2] But no matter which approach is taken, I find that I cannot get beyond my basic mistrustfulness of the essentials of the story. We cannot trust this text to tell unequivocally what happened between the "witch" Alizon Device and her accuser John Law that day in 1612.

2.1. 1959–71: Jean and Josephine Babin, Jeanne Favret-Saada (and Thomas Potts)

Back in 1996–7 when I was writing *Reading Witchcraft*, I framed my mistrustfulness with reference to work of the French ethnographer Jeanne Favret-Saada. In her book, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (published as *Les mots, la mort, les sorts*, 1977; English translation 1980), Favret-Saada had studied witchcraft accusations in rural France in the 1960s and early 1970s, in as far as they ever became formal accusations made to an "unwitcher" or revealed to Favret-Saada herself. Toward the end of her book, she explains how she took on the role of unwitcher herself as part of her work. A typical example of the kind of story that she heard was the story of Jean and Josephine Babin, which I will summarize here in the version that Favret-Saada thought most revealing. In 1959, she concluded, after unpicking all the previous stories she had been told by and about the Babins, that Jean Babin had been accused of witchcraft by an unwitcher helping his supposed victim, a man named Nouet. Babin then fell ill with eczema, became impotent, and took to drink. He and his wife suspected that the unwitcher had bewitched Babin, using counter-magic in an attempt to free and cure his supposed victim, Nouet. But Babin and his wife were both understandably reluctant to admit that he had ever been accused of anything. He did not believe himself to be a witch, and found the whole episode repellent and upsetting. So instead of accusing Nouet's unwitcher of bewitching him, and seeking magical help against this unwitcher, he instead came to believe that another man, Chicot, was to blame. Unwitchers helped him combat Chicot, but Babin continued to be ill. So he also explored the accusation of a third suspect, Ribault, who had nothing to do with the first two suspects, or with Nouet. In each case a mostly unspoken narrative of accusation emerged, was tested, and found wanting.

However, when Favret-Saada first met the Babins she had no knowledge that Jean Babin had once been accused of witchcraft himself. To her, he presented himself—or, importantly, was presented by his wife—as a man bewitched, probably by Ribault, and looking for a new and better unwitcher

2. Emma Wilby, *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 166.

to help cure him. The Babins came to hope that Favret-Saada herself could be that unwitcher, and once they formulated that hope they told her more than they had previously been willing to admit about their past history. This included admitting that as well as being bewitched, Jean Babin had once been placed in the role of witch. Favret-Saada reflected on this tangled series of interactions with great subtlety, noting that if she had not pressed beyond the initial version of events that she was given, she would not have understood even half of the complexities of the matter. As a result of examining webs of story like that of the Babins, she concluded that "any information on the subject [of witchcraft] is not informative, but only moments in a strategy."[3] This was the insight that helped me begin to unpick stories like that of Alizon Device. I began to see that it might be helpful to stop taking the details in each document as factual, in some ill-defined sense, and instead to ask what motivated the storyteller, and his or her addressee. What was each trying to achieve? Lyndal Roper's work on accusers in Augsburg also helped me with this task because she too was interested in the psychology of accusation and how relationships changed in the period leading up to an accusation, as did the work of Diane Purkiss on English accusers.[4]

In each of the English pamphlet stories that I considered, I came to believe that Favret-Saada's experience was helpful. In each case, the story recorded by the magistrate and his clerk as an "examination" or the "information" of an accuser, seemed to be determined by an equally complex series of interactions, some or all of which could potentially remain undocumented. Favret-Saada said that even the version of the Babins story that she considered the most revealing might well be "only a fragment of a story which will never be completely known."[5] In the 1612 case, perhaps Alizon Device was reluctant to admit that although she wanted to buy pins from John Law, she had no money, so she omitted to mention that fact. Perhaps John Law wanted to look charitable, so he told his son Abraham that he made a gift of some to her. Perhaps Abraham was trying to make his father look good. Perhaps a gift was offered and withdrawn, or rejected. Perhaps, even, on the day of the supposed bewitching, events transpired entirely differently: earlier, John Law

3. Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*, trans. Catherine Cullen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de L'Homme, 1980) 180–91, 25.

4. Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

5. Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words*, 148.

met someone else who upset him, but whom he felt was not a plausible witchcraft suspect, or was someone he did not want to talk about. Perhaps Alizon fell in with what John Law said, even if she had no particular memory of the event, because she was placed under pressure by the magistrate, Roger Nowell, who wanted a confession. Perhaps Alizon thought about the sort of things witches usually were said to do, and said something of that kind to Nowell. Perhaps it was only after repeated denials or different versions of the story that the suspect and magistrate hit on a version of events that met both their needs, and that was what they "recorded," each adopting the required role demanded by the narrative they had constructed together.

By the time I had finished thinking about these alternatives and others, the truth of the actual events—or an idea that there may have been any singular truth—had receded so far that I could no longer imagine it. Instead, more helpfully, Alizon Device, John and Abraham Law, and Roger Nowell could be seen as co-authors of the stories they had produced together in the specific circumstances of pre-trial questioning. Nowell's questions may have shaped Alizon's story, and they might be imagined: did you attack the pedlar John Law? Why did you do so? How were you able to hurt him? John Law may have asked himself questions, too: what has happened to me? Why am I so ill? Did I deserve this illness? Was it sent to punish me, or mark me out in some way? His son's anxious arrival may have influenced his speculations, and added some of his own: what's happened to Dad? Is it my fault that I wasn't supporting him better? Has he got himself into trouble, or is he the innocent victim of some criminal? The story certainly changed in its passage from John to Abraham to Alizon, and lost dialogue—internal and external—seems the most likely explanation for this evolution. We will never know the precise sequences of events, but if we do not at least ask how the stories we are hearing or reading emerged, then we are missing a source of information about witchcraft and magic. This applies to any culture in which these phenomena play an important role.

If the authorship and stability of the story of Alizon Device and John Law's meeting was important, so was its genre. It fits into a type of story recognized by Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane's work on English witchcraft trials.[6] Both of these historians came to the conclusion that witchcraft stories might show that in early modern England, accusations frequently came about

6. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Peregrine, 1978); Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

because of a denial of charity. Both John Law's and Abraham Law's versions of the events of March 18, 1612 would fit that model nicely in some respects. A woman begs for pins from a pedlar, or initially says she would like to buy some, but then turns out to be penniless. She is angry when she is refused the pins, the pedlar is suddenly taken ill, and there we have a classic witchcraft attack. But if John Law really did give Alizon Device pins, or even if he *says* he did, the whole story changes. There is a much less convincing grand narrative here, of charity denied, of the vicissitudes of life in post-Reformation England where the church no longer assists the poor as it once did, of ordinary subjects feeling under pressure to donate to beggars. This grand narrative was what Thomas and Macfarlane saw, but I saw primarily a series of stories where tellers jockeyed for position, with one of them telling a very different story, one of motiveless malignity (Abraham). His is the *Daily Mail/National Enquirer* version of the story of charity denied (why did this idle, wastrel young woman expect charity? Indeed, the kind old man did help her—and she attacked him anyway!) The identification of a "motiveless malignity" narrative alongside two stories of "charity denied" does not invalidate Thomas and Macfarlane's theory, because poverty, charity, and commerce were still important contexts, but in my perception it problematized the evidence they were using. These changeable, unfixed words were not, in my opinion, a transparent enough source of statistical data or a stable basis for wider generalizations about society.

The role of the pamphleteer, Thomas Potts, was also important because I was reading his framed version of these stories. What role did he play in my reading of them? Potts was a court clerk at the summer 1612 Lancaster Assizes where Alizon Device was tried with other members of her family and her neighbors. It is likely that he was asked to write up the story of the trial because it contained sensational claims that the witches had plotted to blow up Lancaster Castle. In 1605 a Catholic plot to blow up the English Parliament had been uncovered (the "Gunpowder Plot"), and Potts's pamphlet is dedicated to one of the men who helped to discover this conspiracy, Sir Thomas Knyvet. This seems too neat to be a coincidence and, further, the Lancaster Assizes of 1612 also considered the case of three Protestant women accused of witchcraft at, it was claimed, the insistence of a fugitive Catholic priest and his mouthpiece, a young Catholic girl. These women were acquitted, while Alizon Device and her co-accused were convicted. In each case a point could be made about supposed Catholic threats to the British state, and although Potts did not trumpet these in his account, he did not really need to do so. In publishing, the points had been made, and Potts could expect to enjoy the gratitude of Knyvet, the trial judges, and ultimately the King and

Parliament, for his work on exposing the link between witchcraft and treason. So at every stage of the creation and dissemination of the narrative of witchcraft, there was some form of potential pressure or propaganda which could affect the story told about Alizon Device and her supposed victim(s).

I now want to discuss a second case study to amplify the points made above. This one is more explicit about the processes of questioning an accused witch, about the genesis of the accusation, and about the aims of the recorder and publisher of the account.

3. 1582: GRACE THURLOWE, URSLEY KEMPE, BRIAN DARCY

This pamphlet is titled *A true and just Recorde of the Information, Examination and Confession of all the Witches, taken at S. Oses in the countie of Essex*. It presents itself as the work of an author calling himself W. W., although it may in fact be by the magistrate Brian Darcy—or someone working for him (I would suggest his attorney, William Whetcrofte; Barbara Rosen suggested the devotional author William Lowth).[7] It consists, as its title suggests, of the legal documents produced during pre-trial questioning, like Potts's pamphlet *The Wonderfull Discoverie*.[8] But unlike Potts's work, *A True and just Recorde* also contains, in addition to the usual information about accusers and examinations of suspects, a further category of document titled "confessions." These are very useful extra-descriptive statements recorded by the magistrate during interrogations that followed on from and formed part of examinations. These sections of the pamphlet's text are what make the St. Osyth case most interesting in a discussion about narrating witchcraft, because these "confessions" tell how they were obtained. The magistrate at St. Osyth, Brian Darcy, took particular care to record, or to have recorded, the process of his special questioning.[9] In doing this, he shows us in more detail than Potts does how a story of witchcraft gets fixed in its final version, after previous versions have failed to meet the needs of its collaborative authors.

The confession that I am going to focus on here also shows us how one

7. Barbara Rosen, ed., *Witchcraft in England, 1558–1618* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 106 n.4.

8. See Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft* for a fuller explanation of the trial process against English witches—especially Chapter 2.

9. On Darcy see his entry in *ODNB*: Marion Gibson, "Darcy, Brian (*d.* 1587)," first published 2004; online edition Jan 2008, http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/68939. I discussed these confessions in *Reading Witchcraft* but also returned to them recently in a paper to be published as "French Demonology in an English Village: The St. Osyth Experiment of 1582" in Julian Goodare, Liv Helene Willumsen, and Rita Voltmer, eds., *Witches and Demons* (forthcoming).

"witch," a woman named Ursley Kempe, comes to accept the role, having during the course of her life also occupied the roles of bewitched and unwitcher. In this movement between roles she is like Jean Babin, and Jeanne Favret-Saada herself, constantly becoming something else, accepting and then resisting attempts to fix her role as witch and close off alternatives. Yet in contradiction to this slippery, mutable identity, *A true and just Recorde* is sharply focused on the notions of closure, fixity, and finality. The preface tells us exactly what we are expected to conclude from reading the pamphlet.

In this preface, W. W. dedicated *A true and just Recorde* to Brian Darcy's relative Thomas, Lord Darcy, with a free translation of a passage from Jean Bodin's demonology, *De la Démonomanie des Sorciers* (1580):

> If there hath bin at any time (Right Honorable) any meanes used, to appease the wrath of God, to obtaine his blessing, to terrifie secreete offenders by open transgressors punishments, to withdraw honest natures from the corruption of evil company, to diminish the great multitude of wicked people, to increase the small number of virtuous persons, and to reforme all the detestable abuses, which the perverse witte and will of man doth dayly devise, this doubtlesse is no lesse necessarye then the best, that Sorcerers, Wizzards, or rather Dizzardes, Witches, Wisewomen (for so they will be named), are rygorously punished. Rygorously sayd I? Why it is too milde and gentle a tearme for such a mercilesse generation: I should rather have sayd most cruelly executed; for that no punishment can be thought upon, be it never so high a degree of torment, which may be deemed sufficient for such a divelish and damnable practise. And why? Because al the imaginations, al the consultations, al the conference, al the experimentes, finally the attemptes, proceedinges and conclusions of Sorcerers, Witches, and the rest of that hellish liverie, are meere blasphemers against the person of the most high God . . . [10]

This is all very categorical and didactic. Indeed, its reference to execution —to the ultimate, final act in the life of a witch—means that it could hardly be more conclusive.

To further bolster its conclusiveness, the passage universalizes the image of the witch with its references to "any time" and its repetition of the word "all" four times. It reduces all this to one simple conclusion: the fact that witches are "mere" blasphemers against God and must be cruelly executed as

10. *A True and Just Recorde* (London, 1582), A3-v. There are editions of the pamphlet with further discussion in Rosen (modern spelling) and Gibson, *Early Modern Witches*.

such. The translation is very close to the original.[11] Yet there are some differences: the translator adds considerably to the list of magical practitioners whom he wishes to be targeted for rigorous punishment, so that he claims further comprehensiveness as well as an absolute finality. Not only sorcerers are mentioned, the English word closest to Bodin's "sorciers," but also "Witches" and "Wisewomen." The emphasis on wisewomen fits precisely with the targets of Darcy's questioning later in the pamphlet, especially his interrogation of Ursley Kempe, a would-be unwitcher whom he wants to classify simply as a witch. The translator/prefacer has also added female terms to Bodin's masculine "sorciers," again specifically preparing the reader to accept the account of Darcy's activities that forms the main text of the pamphlet. We are given the impression that Darcy's witchcraft interrogations will show us absolutely convincingly the truth of the prefacer's statement, paraphrasing one of Europe's leading authorities, and deliver to us the certainty we need to judge witches rightly. This impression is strengthened when we discover a fold-out statistical table at the back of the pamphlet, a claim to scientific truth in the form of neat columns of text, lists of attributes, and names. The idea that a nebulous subject like witchcraft or magic could be tabulated and become data is an important part of the pamphlet's claim to have taken a tight grip on it, in preparation for exterminating it altogether.

However, a close reading of Brian Darcy's interactions with the first accused woman, Ursley Kempe, undermines all this neat fixity completely. The main text of the pamphlet begins with Ursley's accusation, which comes from a servant of Lord Darcy, Grace Thurlowe.[12] Grace's identification as a member of the extended Darcy household tells us that witchcraft was suspected at the heart of their family, even if the precise details remain obscure. She is pressed into service in the pamphlet too, giving her employer's kinsman, Brian, a text from which to begin his attack on witchcraft. Grace says that:

> About xii monethes past . . . her Sone Davy Thurlowe, being strangely taken and greatly tormented, Ursley Kempe alias Grey came unto the said Grace to see how the childe did: At which time the childe lying upon a bed in the chimney corner, shee the said Ursley tooke it by the hande, saying A good childe howe art thou loden: and so went thrise out of the doors, and every time when shee came in shee tooke the childe by the hande, and saide A good childe howe art thou loden. And so at her

11. See Jean Bodin, *De la Démonomanie des Sorciers* (1580; Paris, 1587), 216v–217r.
12. *A True and just Recorde*, 2A.

departure the said Grace prayed the saide Ursley to come againe unto her at night to helpe her.[13]

Here Grace presents Ursley as a healer, using magical means in the form of a spoken charm. Presumably, Ursley is trying to carry the illness out of the house, easing the child's "load." But this helpful relationship does not last. Grace goes on:

About three quarters of a yeere ago she was delivered of a womanchild, and saith, that shortly after the birth thereof, the said Ursley fell out with her, for that shee woulde not suffer her to have the nursing of that childe . . . shee the said Grace nursing the said childe, within some short time after that falling out, the childe lying in the Cradle, and not above a quarter olde, fell out of the said Cradle, and brake her necke, and died. The which the said Ursley hearing to have happened, made answere, it maketh no matter. For shee might have suffered mee to have the keeping and nursing of it.[14]

The sudden death of the child, in a moment of terror, guilt, and grief, appears to catalyze accusation.

However, there are also other tensions. Grace and Ursley had fallen out over who was to nurse Grace herself during her lying in, and here we see Grace representing the moment when she made her suspicions clear to Ursley as related to that quarrel:

Grace saying, that if shee should continue lame as shee had done before, shee would finde the meanes to knowe howe it came, and yt she woulde creepe upon her knees to complaine of them to have justice done upon them: And to that shee the saide Ursley saide, it were a good turne: Take heed (said Grace) Ursley, thou hast a naughtie name. And to that Ursley made answere, though shee coulde unwitche shee coulde not witche . . . shee woulde show the said Grace how shee shoulde unwitch herselfe or any other at any time.[15]

We now see Grace and Ursley negotiating Ursley's role. Is she to be labeled a witch and complained of to the magistrate, or is she to remain a kindly healer, unwitching Grace from her lameness and—further—also turning Grace into an unwitcher herself, passing onto her a valuable skill? Of course,

13. *A True and just Recorde*, 2A-2Av.
14. *A True and just Recorde*, 2Av-2A2.
15. *A True and just Recorde*, 2A2.

we know from the context of Grace's recorded words that she ultimately decided to denounce Ursley to the magistrate, attempting to fix her in the role of suspected witch. The magistrate is now to examine Ursley to rule on which version of Grace's representation of Ursley is the correct one: which is the true and just record, the final, fixed version of the story?

But as soon as we hear from Ursley herself, the story becomes more complicated. Her examination took place on February 20th, and immediately she said that she had herself once been troubled with lameness and had visited a wisewoman or healer to seek a cure. The woman told Ursley that she was bewitched and taught her a spell to unwitch herself:

> About tenne or eleven yeeres paste, shee this examinate [Ursley] was troubled with a lameness in her bones and for ease thereof went to one Cockes wife of Weley, nowe deceased, who telled this examinate that shee was bewitched, and at her entretie taught her to unwitche her selfe.[16]

Here, Ursley has positioned herself in her story as a victim of witchcraft, a third role in addition to the two that Grace Thurlowe proposed for her (witch, unwitcher). After that, she depicts herself as Grace Thurlowe had earlier represented herself, someone being taught an innocent piece of counter-magic. Ursley describes the spell, and explains that she then used it to heal two other women whom she herself had diagnosed as bewitched.

None of this was helpful to the magistrate, who was seeking a witch. So he applied pressure to Ursley to move her on from both this story and the two relatively harmless roles that she has occupied within it. And, unusually, Darcy tells us how he tricked the suspected witch into confessing that she is a witch, not a victim or unwitcher. His reading of Bodin offered Darcy a strategy for this: Bodin said that "one must of necessity admit that it is a virtuous, praiseworthy and necessary thing to lie in order to save an innocent person's life . . . so must one do in justice in order to get the truth about hidden wickednesses."[17] So, as Bodin suggests, Darcy lies to Ursley:

> The saide Brian Darcy then promising to the saide Ursley, that if she would deale plainely and confesse the trueth, that shee should have favour and so by giving her faire speeches she confessed as followeth. The saide Ursley bursting out with weeping, fel upon her knees, and confessed that shee had foure spirits, whereof two of them were hees and the other two were shees: the two hee spirits were to punish and

16. *A True and just Recorde*, 2A7–2A7v.
17. Bodin, *Démonomanie des Sorciers*, 189r, 191r, 192v.

kill unto death, and the other two shees were to punishe with lamenes, and other diseases of bodily harme and also to destroy cattell.[18]

Ursley admits she harmed Grace Thurlowe and her children, as well as numerous other people. Here we see how the magistrate got the story he wanted, a process not recorded in any other pamphlet of this period, but probably indicative of more widespread questioning strategies. Note that no torture or physical constraint is described. It may be that this occurred, but as things stand, the pamphlet represents Darcy's strategy as wholly verbal, a linguistic trick to turn unfixity into fixity. The trick is related with such a stagey flourish—"ta-dah!"—that it is almost presented as magical itself.

However, Ursley Kempe was a match for Darcy's cunning, and she continued to shape her own story even after it had been wrested from her by bullying and dishonesty. She was twice recalled to add to her confession, and on the first occasion this is presented as being of her own volition because "shee had forgotten to tell M. Darcy one thing." The second meeting may indeed be her idea, because Ursley's "confession" turns out to be a self-exculpatory accusation against her neighbor, Ales Newman. Ales, Ursley says, shared her witchcraft: they used the same spirits. Brilliantly, Ursley explains that sometimes she lent her spirits to Ales so that Ales could dispatch them on bewitching duties:

Ales Neweman, her nere neighbour came unto this examinates house and fel out with her, and said shee was a witche, and that shee woulde take away her witcherie, and carrie the same unto M. Darcey: But this examinate saieth, shee thought shee did not meane it, but after they had chidden they became friendes, and so shee departed carrying away with her, her spirites in a pot . . . about Christmas last, shee went to the said Ales Newman, and declared to her that Thorlows wife and shee were fallen out, and prayed the saide Newmans wife, to sende the spirite called Tittey, unto her to plague the said Thorlowes wife.[19]

Ursley suggests that although she is herself a witch, it is Ales Newman who has attacked Grace Thurlowe, using the spirits Ursley and Ales share. While appearing compliant, Ursley has actually transferred blame to her former friend.

When I wrote about this moment in *Reading Witchcraft*, I said that "[w]itches struggling within the constraints of a triangular or dual relationship

18. *A True and just Recorde*, 2A7v-2A8.
19. *A True and just Recorde* Bv-B2.

[witch, accuser, magistrate, for example], where each party wants to shape the final story, waver between representations of themselves in a way which makes categorisation of their levels of control of their stories difficult." I suggested that we might call the process "co-authorship," with neither confessing witch nor magistrate wholly in control.[20] Now—as I have done above—I would add that close reading of such texts also shows us how fluid are the *roles* on offer as choices for the confessing witch: here, Ursley seems to be looking for a middle ground between witch and non-witch, in which she implies that she has parted from her demonic spirits, is recovering from witchcraft, and no longer active in attacking her neighbors—although she does employ someone else to attack them, or at least requests that attacks take place. During her third examination on February 24th, Ursley further implicated three other women—Elizabeth Bennet, Ales Hunt, and Annis Glascock—moving herself more firmly into the role of accuser. The pamphlet represents her accusations as revelatory, suggesting that they have uncovered a widespread witchcraft conspiracy in St. Osyth. But for the scholarly reader, the transformation should undermine our faith in all the details of the confessions. What we are seeing here is story, narration, and fabrication, not fact. Ursley's accusations of Ales Newman and then of the other women are clearly, in Favret-Saada's terms, a series of "moments in a strategy": firstly, becoming-witch, and then becoming-accuser.[21] This insight applied to other contexts can deliver new approaches to people's understandings of their own and others' practice of magic and witchcraft.

4. BECOMING-WITCH, BECOMING-ACCUSER

As I revisit *Reading Witchcraft* today, I can see many ways in which I must now add to and refocus my account of what I felt was wrong with assuming that the story of Alizon Device or Ursley Kempe was in any simple way "true." I can reiterate that in her 2009 book *Désorceler* (English translation as *The Anti-Witch*, 2015), Favret-Saada returned to the idea that witchcraft narratives "slip increasingly through our fingers" and are often about deflection and displacement, "constructing acceptable statements."[22] I am also

20. Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft*, 34. Purkiss, slightly differently but helpfully, refers to it as "minimalist confession"; Purkiss, *The Witch in History*, 160–61, 166–68.

21. Miriam Wallraven has also used the term "becoming-witch" in reference to Sylvia Townsend Warner's novel, *Lolly Willowes*, in her *Women Writers and the Occult in Literature and Culture*: *Female Lucifers, Priestesses, and Witches* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 75.

22. Jeanne Favret-Saada, *The Anti-Witch*, trans. Matthew Carey (Chicago: HAU Books, 2015), 4, 56.

inclined to dwell more on how Favret-Saada used Octave Mannoni's ideas to help her think about witchcraft beliefs. She argued that words about witchcraft in modernity can be spoken only with the understanding of what psychoanalysts like Mannoni called *Verleugnung*, or disavowal: "I know well, but all the same" (as in "I know well that witchcraft does not exist in 1970s Normandy, but all the same this illness is very strange . . ."). This insight is particularly relevant, I think, in times of cultural change and in places of cultural meeting, because actually it shows that not everyone has the same confidence in "knowing well" the supposed features of modernity. Beliefs ascribed to both past and present coexist in Favret-Saada's account—none of them are in fact obsolete. In early modernity in England, we might think about how the often contradictory teachings of acculturative demonologists and/or Catholic (past) and Protestant (present) churches made it very difficult to "know well" what to think in one's own mind, despite constant lecturing in print, from the pulpit and elsewhere. Can Mannoni and Favret-Saada's notions of disavowal further inform understanding of all sorts of witch-accusing societies in this kind of flux?

Recent anthropological work has suggested that witchcraft accusations occur today where—in broad terms—modernity meets history. In a review essay of 2016, drawing on his earlier insights in *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust*, Peter Geschiere sums up that "the notion of *sorcellerie*" in some African communities is "constantly 'provoked' by its coexistence with a scientific discourse propagated by the mission, the schools, modern health care, and other institutions." Despite (or even to some extent because of) the apparent certainties and solutions offered by these institutions, witchcraft accusations respond to the sense that "nowadays something basic is going wrong and that things are getting out of hand." Geschiere concludes that "witchcraft or shamanism is about a lack of certainty, something that defies explanation, a gap that is difficult or even impossible to fill." His insights are also partly inspired by James Siegel's work on witchcraft accusations in Java in the late 1990s. Siegel suggests that witchcraft beliefs "insist on the continued presence of an unknown." Believing witchcraft to be a real force depends on suspicion which is only strengthened by "introducing a term—'witch'—that is incapable of doing more than designating that something is at work which is not understood."[23] Fear and fascination surround this inability to understand and

23. Peter Geschiere, "Witchcraft, Shamanism and Nostalgia: A Review Essay," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58, no. 1 (2016): 243–44; idem, *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in Comparison* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013); James Siegel, *Naming the Witch* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 25. See also Michael D. Bailey, "Provincializing European Witchcraft:

contain—we can see it in Potts and Darcy, in the words of accusers and accused wherever we look.

Siegel suggests that after an encounter with witchcraft, the self is transformed by recognition that here is something beyond the powers of the ordinary mind to comprehend, something sublime. Everything is charged with the power, threat, and thrill of the unknown and must be re-evaluated. Yet, Siegel goes on:

> To recognize the limitation of our powers of cognition is thus to confirm that we really do have certain capacities . . . [t]o feel fragmented and overwhelmed in confronting what we do not know thus ends in a strengthened definition of ourselves.[24]

Encountering the witch in a sublime moment thus leads to accusation, as a self-assertive act, and—however wrongly—it gives the accuser a sense of control, especially linguistic control over "naming" a "witch." Once the witch is named, a truth can be imagined that explains the situation clearly and a narrative can be constructed to show this to others. Favret-Saada also discusses the telling of a story of bewitchment in this context as a kind of therapeutic discourse (it would be very interesting to consider this in almost literal terms—for example, John Law's speech and motor functions did begin to return as he narrated his story to his son, Abraham claims). Yet Siegel goes on to point out that while speaking and writing about the witch is an attempt to make sense of and contain the unknown by signifying it in language, this fails in important ways. Witches do not exist as conceived in accusers' stories, or pamphleteers' or demonologists' books. The clear understanding of witchcraft beyond the word "witchcraft" still "remains inaccessible," an unease essential to its power and violence.[25]

Despite attempts to close it down in words, then, witchcraft continually generates new stories because no story is ever truly final, truly convincing. It is always incomplete. In this trait, the witchcraft accusation is a good example of "becoming," Gilles Deleuze's way of describing the unfixed and mutable.[26] In 2010, João Biehl and Peter Locke proposed a "Deleuze-inspired

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Thoughts on Peter Geschiere's Latest Synthesis," *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 10, no. 1 (Summer 2015): 75–96.

24. Siegel, *Naming the Witch*, 24.

25. Siegel, *Naming the Witch*, 21.

26. E.g. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 170–71(originally published as *Pourparlers* [1990]); and idem, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 1 (originally published as *Critque et Clinique* [1993]).

ethnography," in their case to deal with the "complexities," "messiness," and "real struggles" of people living in poor urban cultures in Brazil and Bosnia-Herzegovina. They argued that the task of the human sciences in situations of great pain and fear is "to respect and incorporate, without reduction, the angst, uncertainty, and the passion for the possible that life holds."[27] Among other things, this is about listening or reading properly. If we do that, we can see all these traits in witchcraft stories like those of John and Abraham Law, Alizon Device, and Ursley Kempe: angst about one's own and others' fates, the truth, the right thing to say, what is expected; uncertainty about all of these and about what really happened. We can see especially perhaps "a passion for the possible."[28] In Biehl and Locke's formulation, this phrase refers to the desire for healing and recovery, for self-fashioning progress.[29] In magical narratives it can refer to that too, but also on top of that, to what magical potential represents: a power of transformation that can include control, naming, explanation, and all sorts of "what-if." With this sense of possibility in play, the story of magic constantly mutates to suit the needs of its teller because it is not constrained by the boundaries of possibility as we usually conceive of them in modern, secular life today.

If we wanted to experiment with some labels for this reading of witchcraft, we might suggest that witches constitute a Deleuzian "minority," and their testimonies, a "minor literature."[30] Their accusers, often hardly more empowered, can also be considered minoritarian. This does not mean they are literally, numerically, in a minority, but rather that their status is conceived to be "minor": marginal, resistant, unassimilated. Deleuze was keen to emphasize that this was not a subjected, or abject position, but one that could be powerful in certain ways. No minoritarian is wholly determined by a Foucauldian power structure, something that traps them into ventriloquizing the concerns of an elite. Witches and their accusers are not simply mouthing the words of the magistracy or religious hierarchy, although this surely plays a part in what each of them says because their words are prompted and recorded by members of those elite groups. As Stuart Clark's "Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft" and *Thinking with Demons* suggested,

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27. João Biehl and Peter Locke, "Deleuze and the Anthropology of Becoming," *Current Anthropology* 51, no. 3 (2010): 317, 319, 321.

28. Biehel and Locke, "Deleuze and the Anthropology of Becoming," 319.

29. "Self-fashioning" is Stephen Greenblatt's term; see his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

30. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

binary structures of God and anti-God, them and us, articulated in the demonologists' textbooks produced by this elite helped to construct the notion of late medieval and early modern witchcraft.[31] But this overarching binary structure does not determine everything that is said by the accused and accusers discussed in my paper. Instead, they resist, evade, and edit as well as invent for themselves, producing their own discourse and language, creating an inharmonious, unfinished overall picture that meets the needs of the magistracy and church in only very approximate ways. It is a magical literature that transforms as it is spoken and written down.

Deleuze and his collaborator Félix Guattari thought of this kind of cultural production as a map on which territories could be marked and defined, but also "deterritorialized," taken back or redefined. Thus, Deleuze described his analytical technique as cartographic. With this image in mind, but also prompted by the idea of minoritarian literature, Biehl and Locke call for "micro-analysis," listening to the stories of individuals reflectively as literary texts, or as if one were poring over a map. They see this as a way to analyze people's experiences without opting for a reductive theory that fixes them in a particular static moment. This approach—the perception of incompleteness and constant becoming in statements that are imagined as contested texts or maps—can be applied to stories of witchcraft and magic in the past and the present and across the globe. Such texts must be read closely and listened to properly, discussed as strategic interventions in a situation in flux, as stories of becoming.

31. Stuart Clark, "Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft," *Past and Present* 87, no. 1 (1980): 98–127; idem, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).